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ROLLING THUNDER:

COULD THEORY HAVE HELPED?

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This paper examines President Johnson's decision to initiate a strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam at the outset of the Vietnam war The campaign was called Operation Rolling Thunder After outlining the failure of the operation, the paper will turn to whether military theory could have helped The discussion also addresses the issue, raised by the military, of undue political constraints on the operation The analysis suggests that military theory would probably not have led President Johnson to a different decision on Rolling Thunder Rather, the principal difficulties were such factors as the President's approach to decision-making and the fixed mindsets of the President and his top advisers The paper concludes that military theory might benefit from a greater emphasis on ways to encourage well-informed decisions at times of crisis and war

President Johnson approved Operation Rolling Thunder on 19 February 1965 The deliberations leading up to this decision had lasted for almost a year, beginning with a request to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in March 1964 to develop a program of "graduated overt military pressure" against North Vietnam [1] Rolling Thunder was seen by the President's advisers as a major watershed decision, and it set the stage for rapidly escalating US involvement in the Vietnam war Yet, there seems to have been virtually no discussion of an overall US military strategy for the war The strategic concept appeared to be Rolling Thunder itself, i e , a strategic bombing campaign against military and industrial targets in North Vietnam The primary political objective was to break the North Vietnamese "will" to support the insurgency in the South Another more

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immediate political objective was to boost the morale of the South Vietnamese leadership The military objective, which became increasingly important over time, was to help interdict the flow of personnel and supplies from the North

By most accounts, Rolling Thunder was a failure Although it dropped more bombs on Vietnam over three years than had been dropped on all of Europe in World War II, it did not break the North Vietnamese will [2] If anything, the will of North Vietnam hardened, and it pursued the war with greater determination than before At the same time, any effect on South Vietnamese morale was transitory and relatively insignificant Even in its interdiction role, the bombing had minimal success – as attested in repeated official assessments by the US intelligence community and in outside studies by RAND and the Institute of Defense Analysis [3]

The question is whether military theory could have helped to prevent this failure Let us look, for example, at Clausewitz's dictum that "the first of all strategic questions" is for the statesman and commander to establish "the kind of war on which they are embarking "[4] Actually, President Johnson and his advisers knew that the war in the South was at that time a guerrilla war, and they sought to affect it with their own conventional war against the North In their view, successful anti-guerrilla warfare on the ground would likely require – based on prior experience in the Philippines and Malaya – 10 to1 numerical superiority Strategic bombing, they hoped, would provide a way to end the war without the need for a major ground commitment

Part of the problem was a failure to understand that their strategic concept had little relevance to the situation in Vietnam Strategic bombing was a blunt instrument that would not easily diminish the morale of a largely agrarian nation of self-sufficient

villages Nor could it make much difference to the relatively modest flow of personnel and supplies to the South Another difficulty, to use Clausewitz's concept, was an unclear "center of gravity" for the guerrilla forces The forces that posed an immediate threat were in the South and required minimal outside support, at least as long as they continued to operate in a guerrilla mode The salient challenge for the US – and a key center of gravity for both sides – was the South Vietnamese government in Saigon Indeed, LBJ seemed to sense this when he initially decided to postpone Rolling Thunder until political stability could be achieved in the South [5]

But even if Northern support had been an important center of gravity, prior US experience with strategic bombing gave reason to doubt that Hanoi would respond positively to Rolling Thunder, especially within a reasonable timeframe The conventional strategic bombing in World War II, for example, was highly controversial and appeared to have significant results only after much trial and error and a massive, prolonged campaign [6] The President's advisers, including General Curtis LeMay who had led the fire-bombing campaign against Tokyo, nonetheless appeared to believe that strategic bombing would have devastating effects in North Vietnam This may have reflected a certain hubris, e g , the belief that a small nation like North Vietnam could not long endure the bombing of a superpower Even George Ball, a participant in earlier, critical studies of strategic bombing, endorsed the Rolling Thunder decision as a means to "increase the United States bargaining power" with the North [7]

Another explanation for the failure of Rolling Thunder might be excessive political interference in the operation In fact, the President personally approved a carefully crafted target list for Rolling Thunder on a weekly basis There were various

restrictions on the number of sorties, kinds of targets, and target location, e g , attacks were forbidden within 30 nautical miles of Hanoi These political constraints reflected a top-level concern, based in part on the Korea experience, to keep a tight rein on the military and to avoid Chinese or Soviet intervention The result served as a good illustration of how policy could, in Clausewitz's words, "permeate all military operations, and have a continuous influence on them [8] From the President's perspective, this was as it should be The controls on the bombing, including several halts, also gave the President potentially useful carrots and sticks The President was a politician who liked to wheel and deal and who saw the bombing program as his "political resources for negotiating a peace "[9]

From the perspective of many in the US military, the President's approach was a "continuation of policy" taken to an extreme The paradoxical trinity was out of balance Some likely thought, as Clausewitz found in the pre-Napoleonic period, that undue policy influence was turning the war into a "half-and-half affair and often into downright make-believe "[10] The US military solution was to press for an approach that more closely resembled the "ideal" of total war They argued that to start lightly and escalate slowly was like "pulling a tooth bit by bit " The need was, rather, to apply the bombing "hard and fast to obtain maximum impact with minimum loss "[11]

The failure of Rolling Thunder, however, probably had little to do with political constraints As already suggested, strategic bombing was not very relevant to the situation at hand The targets covered by Rolling Thunder eventually included virtually all of those that the JCS recommended While LBJ's gradualist approach may have had some negative operational effects, the North Vietnamese seemed always to find

innovative ways around the bombing campaign An example of the difficulties involved was the effort to strike POL targets, authorized by the President in June, 1966 The strikes continued until late August and successfully destroyed the North's bulk storage facilities Despite advance predictions that the campaign would seriously harm the North, it appeared to make no difference The problem was that North Vietnam had already taken precautionary measures by storing its vital POL in drums in underground dugouts and villages throughout the country Reportedly, the targeting of POL storage facilities was the last escalation that McNamara supported enthusiastically [12]

Based on the subsequent Linebacker campaigns of President Nixon, some still argue that earlier unrestricted bombing could have made a difference The Linebacker bombing campaigns -- launched in May and December 1972, respectively -- had very few political constraints and were rapidly followed by the agreement that ended America's active participation in the Vietnam war Nixon could afford fewer political constraints since, as a result of his superpower diplomacy, he had less reason to worry about Chinese or Soviet intervention In addition, the Linebacker campaigns probably had a greater impact since the North by then had switched to conventional war, as opposed to the earlier guerrilla war Even so, the actual effects of the bombing on the North's willingness to engage in peace negotiations is debatable Linebacker's contribution to the rapid completion of a peace agreement could have been "largely fortuitous "[13]

Let us return to whether military theory could have helped to inform the decision to initiate Rolling Thunder Apparently, neither the President nor his Secretary of Defense had much familiarity with military affairs They were suspicious of the military and not inclined to think in strategic military terms [14] Certainly, if they had had a basic

familiarity with theorist like Clausewitz, they might have had more doubts about Rolling Thunder and felt more comfortable in discussing the matter with their military advisers On the other hand, Clausewitz while providing a useful framework for analysis does not offer clear prescriptions Potentially, theories of strategic bombing would have been more helpful given the nature of Rolling Thunder But the subject was highly controversial, and a definitive theory simply did not exist Moreover, the President's in-house experts – notably, Curtis LeMay and George Ball – appeared to ignore the post-World War II surveys of strategic bombing and agreed, albeit for different reasons, with the Rolling Thunder decision [15]

Insofar as the President and his advisers may have thought about military theory, they were likely influenced most strongly by theories of limited warfare The graduated escalation of Rolling Thunder was clearly in keeping with such theory These theories were "in vogue" at the time and seemed to fit the prior experience of the Rolling Thunder decision-makers in the Cuban Missile Crisis [16] Could limited war theory, then, have helped to avert the failure of Rolling Thunder? This theory appears to devote somewhat more attention than Clausewitz to the actual formulation of policies to be pursued in war For example, Robert Osgood stresses that a nation's political objectives must pertain to "specific and attainable situations of fact " Otherwise, they will remain "in the realm of aspiration, not in the realm of policy " But, beyond a general appeal for "objective calculation," Osgood does not elaborate on exactly how to ensure such a policy result [17]

Perhaps the President and his advisers simply did not have time to put military theory into practice The accounts of the Rolling Thunder decision do not paint a picture of careful calculation Rather, the decision-makers appeared to be primarily in a reaction

mode The situation in South Vietnam by the end of 1964 was rapidly deteriorating Our Ambassador, in a year-end cable from Saigon, predicted that unless conditions changed, the US would soon face the installation of a hostile government "which will ask us to leave "[18] On 6 February 1965, while the President's National Security Adviser was on a fact-finding mission to Saigon, the Viet Cong attacked an American air base at Pleiku The President ordered a retaliatory air raid against the North As McNamara put it, "the Pleiku attack and our reaction to it contributed significantly" to the decision on Rolling Thunder [19] The atmosphere of impending crisis, in short, made objective calculation very difficult While the President had wanted to wait for the situation to stabilize before pursuing strategic bombing, he now "suddenly" realized that "doing nothing was more dangerous than doing something "[20]

On the other hand, the faulty decision-making on Rolling Thunder cannot be ascribed solely to the pressures of the moment The options for graduated military pressure on the North had been refined over a period of almost a year There was even time for war gaming which had raised serious questions about the strategic bombing option, much to the dismay of General LeMay [21] The President, moreover, did not simply rush to a decision during the crises of early 1965 He sent McGeorge Bundy for a first-hand look in Saigon and reached out for other views, including those of former President Eisenhower, before giving his final go-ahead to Rolling Thunder

In this writer's view, a key problem – and a primary reason why military theory could not have helped -- was the decision-making process itself Although the President reached out to others, he did not reach very far In fact, there seems to have been a striking absence of consultation even with in-house experts who might have challenged

the Rolling Thunder idea A CIA report in January 1965, for example, suggested that the increasing success of the Viet Cong was based more on Southern factors than on support from the North On 11 February, moreover, the CIA cautioned that the North would not likely be motivated to restrain the Viet Cong by the initiation of a strategic bombing campaign [22] Such reports, it appears, were discounted by the President and his top advisers, including CIA Director McCone As one expert described it, the decision-making process put a premium on loyalty and team play and seemed "rigged to produce consensus rather than controversy" This appeared to be the case not only at the Presidential level but also at the top in State and Defense, including within the JCS The latter, while "deeply divided on the conduct of the war," continued to present "unified proposals" to the civilians [23]

The situation was aggravated by the fact that the salient need was to go in a radically different direction As Maxwell Taylor at least raised in a moment of frustration, the deteriorating situation in the South provided a potential opportunity for the US to withdraw from Vietnam Looking back, McNamara suggests we should have seized that opportunity "It is clear that disengagement was the course we should have chosen"[24] But a radical change of direction is not likely, to say the least, where the pressures are for consensus

A related problem was the prevailing mindset of the President and his top advisers Essentially, the US leadership was trapped in an anticommunist paradigm, akin to an ideology – which posited a monolithic communist threat that had to be contained, as a matter of vital US interests, on a global basis Under the circumstances, Rolling Thunder was probably a foregone conclusion Greater familiarity with military theory, or

even a handy checklist for the development of military strategy, would not likely have made much difference The President and his advisers should have tried harder to make an "objective calculation" of attainable ends and means and to assess the costs and risks involved But the likelihood is that such an effort would have been largely a matter of going through the motions With their minds already fixed in a prevailing paradigm, they would almost certainly have come out in the same place

What, then, are the lessons of Rolling Thunder for the future? Perhaps the most salient lesson from this case, and from the Vietnam case generally, is the need to examine carefully one's underlying assumptions Even if one accepts their prevailing paradigm, Lyndon Johnson and his advisers made many false assumptions about the dynamics of the war in Vietnam, particularly the role of Hanoi, and their ability to affect that war Of course, the careful examination of underlying assumptions – and developing appropriate ways to meet, in Osgood's terms, "specific and attainable" objectives -- is difficult under any circumstances and especially at times of war In war, the violent side of the Clausewitz trinity comes into play, coloring governmental rationality But precisely because of the difficulties involved, President Johnson and his advisers should have made a greater effort to seek out differing views While LBJ may have had legitimate concerns about such problems as leaks and the domestic political context, the issue was too important not to involve the experts Significant differences clearly existed – at CIA, State, and within the JCS --and they should have been explored

With regard to military theory, this case helps to underline the fact that theory, while potentially useful, can by no means ensure correct decisions on matters of war or military strategy There are many theories that can be interpreted in different ways, and

much will depend ultimately on such factors as the mindsets and personalities of those involved At the same time, Rolling Thunder suggests a need for theory to devote greater attention to the problem of faulty decision-making The development of processes and structures specifically tailored to promote effective decisions at times of crisis and war might be a useful addition to military theory, especially for theories of limited war with their stress on the need for sustained policy guidance This effort should not be a re-hash of current models, such as that of the rational actor Rather, the focus would be on developing feasible decision-making alternatives, for busy statesmen in high-pressure situations, that could help to encourage the kind of questioning and analysis that was so clearly lacking in the decision on Rolling Thunder

The need to "get it right" is perhaps most critical for initial decisions on whether or not to go to war The decision on Rolling Thunder can be viewed as such a decision When he approved the bombing, the President crossed a threshold and fully engaged the US in war In these situations, statesmen and commanders simply cannot afford a decision-making process, like President Johnson's, that is "rigged" in favor of consensus As Clausewitz puts it "War is no pastime, it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts It is a serious means to a serious end "[25]

[1] This request was NSAM 288 of 17 March See Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York Free Press, 1989) 45
[2] Data on bombs are from Robert S McNamara, *In Retrospect* (New York Random House, 1995), 174
[3] See Larry Cable "The Operation was a Success, but the Patient Died The Air War in Vietnam," in *An American Dilemma Vietnam, 1964-1973*, ed Dennis E Showalter and John G Albert (Chicago Imprint Publications, 1993), 139-139, 145
[4] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* ed and trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1976), 88
[5] McNamara, 161
[6] See Lord Tedder, *Air Power in War* (London Hodder and Stoughton, 1948, rpt Westport CT Greenwood Press, 1975), especially 104 ff
[7] McNamara, 174 note According to McNamara, although Ball had previously opposed the bombing, he changed his position -- at least at the critical decision point -- in a February 13 memorandum to the President
[8] Clausewitz, 87
[9] Earl H Tilford, Jr , *Setup What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama Air University Press, 1991), 94
[10] Clausewitz, 609
[11] Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet A History of the Vietnam War From a Military Man's Viewpoint* (New York Ballantine Books, 1984), 97
[12] Tilford, 116-120
[13] Mark Clodfelter, "Nixon and the Air Weapon," in *An American Dilemma* 182
[14] George C Herring, *"Cold Blood" LBJ's Conduct of Limited War in Vietnam*, Harmon Memorial Lectures, no 33 (US Air Force Academy, Colorado 1990), 4-5
[15] Theories of guerrilla warfare, which because of time limitations were not explored for this paper, could have been useful as well But in this writer's view, such theories – which were surely known to a degree by some of the Rolling Thunder advisers – would not likely have changed the President's mind on the need to pursue the operation
[16] Herring 4
[17] Robert E Osgood, *Limited War The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1957), 15
[18] McNamara, 165
[19] Ibid , 170
[20] Tilford, 104
[21] Ibid 97-98
[22] Cable, 120
[23] Herring, 5, 9
[24] McNamara, 164
[25] Clausewitz, 86